

The Jewish Woman In America

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Reprinted from The American Hebrew

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The story of the Jew on the American continent begins with the discovery itself, for there were two Jews who accompanied Columbus on his memorable voyage. The edict of expulsion from Spain and the discovery of America occurred in the same year, and naturally thousands of secret Jews in Spain and Portugal took advantage of the discovery by going to the New World, in the years of oppression that followed. Here they hoped to be able to resume the faith taught them by their mothers, yet their plans were baffled by the ever watchful eye of the Inquisition which soon had its agents in America as well, and established branches of its dread tribunal in Mexico, in Chili and Peru.

Much indeed has been written about the fortitude of the men who sacrificed property, and even life itself, for the faith of their fathers, yet some of the most dramatic cases of self-sacrifice and devotion on American soil, were cases of Jewish women who suffered in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies.

Long before the seventeenth century, the Mexican annals furnish the names of numerous female martyrs. At the trial of Jorge de Almeida, in 1595, a number of Jewish women are mentioned, several being members of the Caravajal family, and among those referred to in the session of 1600 were Dona Clara Enriquez, Constança Rodriguez, Anna Lopez and many others. Dona Lenor de Andrada was convicted of being a Jewess, and the ancient record describes another Mexican victim as a strict observer of the Mosaic law to such an ex-

^{*}This paper, in somewhat condensed form, was published some years ago by the Council of Jewish Women and subsequently appeared in translation both in France and Germany. It has been expanded by the author and brought to date for the present publication.

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tent, "as to fast during the whole week and eat only once every third day." This was a self-imposed penance quite common among Marranos for having even outwardly abjured their faith.

Nor were these women elderly matrons whom time and adversity had inclined toward religion; quite a few were in the very bloom of youth. Anna Xuares, a native of Mexico, for instance, being condemned at the early age of twenty-five, after having confessed to having observed the fast days and ceremonial laws from her fourteenth year. Another victim, Leonora de Carcerez, only daughter of Sr. Antonio Diaz de Carcerez, was likewise condemned for observing the law of Moses, and went in the *auto-da-fe* which took place in the Plaza Major of the City of Mexico, on March 5, 1601, at the early age of fourteen.

The dreadful tribunal spared neither age nor sex, and so we find old women, like Dona Catalina Enriquez of Vera Cruz, condemned as Jewish heretics, at the age of eighty. She died in her cell September 25, 1644.

At the trial of Gabriel of Grenada, which took place in the City of Mexico in 1642, no less than thirty-four Jewish women are mentioned; several of these are described as having died in prison, others as tortured by the Inquisition. As several of the family names subsequently appear in the history of our thirteen colonies, it may not be amiss to mention a few of the names of such victims: Dona Blanca Mendes de Rivera, Beatrice Henriquez, Clara de Sylva, Maria Gomez, Isabel Nunez and others.

There is sometimes a grim humor in these American Inquisition records, for it appears that occasionally the victim had died pending trial, or at times had even been dead for several years before the accusation was made. In such cases, the court would nevertheless proceed to try the case with all solemnity, hear the witnesses as though the accused were alive, and finally give judgment, ordering the image of the accused to be burned in public. Thus, for

instance, we find such a case in 1659 entitled, "Case against the Memory and Fame of Isabel Texoso of New Vera Cruz."

The same sad story can be retold of the Jewish women of South America. Isabel Isles was a victim at Cartagena in 1712, while in Peru, Dona Maria Anna de Castro had the melancholy distinction of being the last victim to be burnt at the *auto-da-fe* at Lima in 1736. Many of these Jewish victims were women of culture and refinement, a prominent instance being the mother of the famous Portuguese poet, Antonio da Silva, who was brought from Rio de Janeiro to Lisbon, and, after spending years in prison, suffered death for her faith in 1739.

But I will not dwell longer on that long, sad story of persecution and suffering. Before leaving it, however, one charge against these noble martyrs deserves special mention, because it occurs so frequently in those dark annals, an accusation which we might wish could be made more generally today, namely, "that they taught their children to observe the law which God gave unto Moses."

Long before Jews came to what is now the United States, considerable numbers of them had settled in various parts of the West Indies, Mexico, Brazil, and the South American colonies. When Brazil was taken by the Dutch early in the seventeenth century, the secret Jews residing there at once threw off the mask, and openly avowed their faith. In this way we get some idea how very large was the Jewish population in America at that early date. Thus we find that a single city, Pernambuco in Brazil, had a Jewish population of over five thousand as early as 1653. This, it must be remembered, was greater than was the entire Jewish population of the United States in 1820.

But Brazil was recaptured by the Portuguese in 1654, and the Jews naturally had to leave the country at once. Thousands left, some for Holland, some settling in the West Indies and elsewhere, while one unfortunate vessel was captured by pirates, its passengers plundered and put off at a point

on the Cuban coast called Cape St. Anthony, where they were finally picked up by a French captain who brought them to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, as New York was then known.

The women who came in that party have left no record; they were probably simple, industrious housewives and their best claim to our regard is that they managed to bring up their sons and daughters amid such non-Jewish surroundings, as devoted supporters of their ancestral faith. Only here and there does a name appear in the Dutch records, the most frequent being that of Ricke Nunes, who came in 1654.

From these Dutch records we learn also that the Jewish housewife of 250 years ago, had her troubles with domestics as well. Asser Levy Van Swellem, one of the most prominent Jews who arrived from Brazil, was a staunch defender of his rights and those of his people against Stuyvesant and the most powerful men in the colony, and therefore figures frequently and successfully in the court records of New Amsterdam. One of his lawsuits was against Balthazar Bayart. It appears that Mrs. Levy had hired Ancke Jansen's daughter as her maid, but that somehow Bayart's wife got her before her time had expired. Levy obtained a judgment in his favor directing the maid to return to her service.

Those early Jewish women evinced a laudable interest in congregational and communal affairs. To this day the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of New York shows its gratitude to several women who gave substantial aid in effecting the building of the first synagogue erected in this city in 1730, by the recital of a special *escaba* to their memory. In this manner their names have been preserved: Abigail Franks, Simha de Torres, Rachel Louiza, Judith Pacheco, Hannah Michaels and Miriam Lopez de Fonseca.

The minutes of the congregation recently published, show however, that there were other women who contributed besides those mentioned. Among these were the widow Rebecca Ashers, the widow Rachel Naph-

tali, Bilah Levy, Ribka De Fonseca and Rebecca Sylvia of Barbados.

There is scant mention of women in the other colonies, except in the case of Rhode Island and Georgia. In both these, however, their history is exceedingly interesting. Many of the women mentioned at Newport and at Savannah had been secret Jews in Spain and Portugal and fled only when it became absolutely necessary to do so. That they even knew aught of their faith is the more remarkable when we reflect that they had been brought up outwardly as Christians, and that their mothers and grandmothers for generations had outwardly been adherents of the Catholic Church.

To Newport such Jews and Jewesses continued to come directly from the Iberian Peninsula as late as 1767. In Georgia, a number of these secret Jews were among the earliest settlers of the colony in 1733. Many touching customs of these immigrants deserve our attention. The Marrano children in Spain and Portugal were baptized and named by the Church, yet secretly they received distinctly Jewish names as well. By the former they were known in the community, by the latter in the closer circle of kindred. Often even the ancient family name was thus preserved. To illustrate, the famous Donna Gracia was known to the world as Beatrice de Luna, while to her kin she was known as Gracia Benveniste.

Instances of this double naming appear frequently among the early Jewish settlers in the thirteen colonies. When Aaron Lopez, the famous merchant of Newport, brought his wife and daughter from Lisbon, their names were Anna and Catharine but these were immediately changed to Abigail and Sarah.

Another touching custom is found in the devices practiced by Jewish women for generations, in order to divert the suspicions of the Inquisition. They were closely watched and therefore had to adopt devices in observing ceremonies or in reciting their Hebrew prayers. These habits

became so strong that the women never were able to cast them off even after years of residence in America. To illustrate, Dr. Nunez, one of the earliest settlers in Georgia, brought his wife and daughter with him. It is related that to their dying day, those ladies were unable to repeat their Hebrew prayers without the assistance of the Catholic rosary, a device adopted originally to give the appearance of Catholic devotion.

Many of these women were women of high social standing and refinement. Dr. Nunez, for instance, had been the Court physician in Portugal, but being betrayed by a servant, he and his family were compelled to flee on short notice, amid circumstances thrillingly related by the late Mordecai M. Noah.

As a general thing these Marrano women possessed many accomplishments. The American Jewish Historical Society possesses a bit of needlework made by a secret Jewess during the Inquisition, nearly four hundred years ago, and which was one of the few things she was able to save when making her escape. It was subsequently used for ceremonial purposes in connection with admitting children into the covenant; the last time it was so used being in the case of Mordecai M. Noah, in 1786.

Besides these Marranos, there were among the first settlers of Georgia, another and distinct group constituting the earliest German Jews in America. To this group belongs the Sheftall family. These German women are mentioned by the Lutheran minister, Bolzius, who came to Georgia a year or two after the colony was founded, and he records the kindness and hospitality of these German Jewesses to the Lutherans, who had themselves just fled from persecution.

In 1740 the British government passed an act for the naturalization of foreigners in the American colonies, and it is remarkable that so large a number of Jewish women availed themselves of this legislation. In Jamaica no less than forty names appear, several of them doubtless related to

many of our old American families. Among these are Esther Pereira Mendes, Leah Cardoza and Esther Pinto Brandon.

In colonial society prior to the Revolution, several fair Jewish women took a prominent part, and not a few were numbered among the belles of their day. Some of these unfortunately became lost to Judaism. To this group belonged several ladies of the wealthy and influential Franks family. Abigail Franks married Andrew Hamilton of Philadelphia. Phila Franks in 1750 married General Delancey, and her New York home was one of the pretentious mansions of the day, which subsequently became a public place known as Fraunces Tavern, the very building in which George Washington delivered his Farewell Address. A daughter of Joseph Simon of Lancaster married Dr. Nicholas Schuyler, subsequently one of the surgeons in the Revolutionary War. Sarah Isaacs, the daughter of a patriot soldier, also married out, her son being John Howard Payne, the composer of "Home, Sweet Home."

The most brilliant woman in this group was Rebecca Franks, whose career has been sketched by various writers; among others Mrs. Ellet and Miss Wharton, and she is likewise introduced by Dr. Weir Mitchell in his novel, "Hugh Wynne."

Born to wealth, gifted with a ready wit, and rare personal beauty, she had access to the most exclusive circle of colonial society. Her grandfather had been the British king's sole agent for the Northern Colonies, while her father was the king's agent for Pennsylvania. Naturally therefore, the family, like so many of the colonial aristocracy, took the king's side in the Revolutionary struggle.

Of Rebecca Franks, Miss Wharton says:

"She was a reigning belle during the British occupation of Philadelphia, when General Howe was in the habit of tying his horse before David Franks' house and going in to have a chat with the ladies and possibly to enjoy a laugh at some of Miss Rebecca's spirited sallies. Although the beautiful Jewess shared the honors of belle-

dom with fair Willings and Shippens, no one seems to have disputed her title to be considered the wit of her day among woman-kind."

She was one of the queens of beauty at the Meschianza, a splendid fête given to



LADY JOHNSON
(Rebecca Franks)

General Howe before leaving Philadelphia in 1778, and which had been arranged by the ill-fated Major André.

Her literary efforts, both in prose and verse, are brilliant and vivacious, and it is from her pen that we have perhaps the most interesting picture of the social life in New York during the Revolution.

She married Colonel, afterward General, Sir Henry Johnson. Many distinguished Americans in later years visited her in England, among these being General Winfield Scott, who has left an account of her in his autobiography. Her death occurred in 1823.

The great majority of Jews, however,

were staunch adherents of the patriot cause and several Jewish women figure in Revolutionary history. In his history of Leicester, Massachusetts, Emory Washburn pays a fine tribute to the Jewish men and women who left Newport on the British occupation and settled at Leicester. His work gives several instances of the devotion of those women to the tenets of their faith.

Among the patriot women of the South are the names of Mrs. Judy Minis and her daughter. The wife of a Revolutionary soldier, she was heart and soul in the cause. A strict observer of Jewish ritual, she prepared the meals for Jewish soldiers taken prisoners by the British after the fall of Savannah. Her intense patriotism so disturbed the British commander, that for a time he ordered both women to remain in their house, but finally, owing to their constant communication and assistance to the patriots, Mrs. Minis and her daughter were ordered to leave the town. They accordingly went to Charleston, of which place the husband was one of the patriotic defenders.

In Westchester County we meet another patriotic Jewess, Esther Etting Hays, the wife of David Hays, also a Revolutionary soldier. When Tarleton with a party of British raided the village of Bedford in 1779, Tory neighbors entered the house where Mrs. Hays was lying upon a sick bed with a new-born infant. They demanded information, which she was supposed to possess, concerning the patriot plans, and, on her refusal to comply, the house was set afire, and mother and child were saved only by faithful negro servants, who conveyed them to a shelter in the woods.

Among the noble examples of Jewish womanhood at this period were Mrs. Moses Michael Hays of Boston, and Mrs. Reyna Touro, who, in a Puritan community, with hardly any Jewish associations, brought up their children as observant Jews, Judah Touro and his brother becoming the great communal workers of the next generation.

It is noteworthy that Jewish children in

colonial days received elementary education, irrespective of sex. There were then no public schools, but the congregation generally employed some teacher who taught both boys and girls. The result was that Jewish women in colonial times were rarely illiterate, and we even find a Jewish girl among the earliest female students in an American college. The records of Franklin College, founded by Benjamin Franklin, and now known as Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania, show that among its students in 1787 was Richea Gratz, a daughter of Michael Gratz, who had been one of the signers of the Non-Importation Agreement of 1765.

The beginning of the nineteenth century finds women taking a more active part, by their organization of benevolent and charitable institutions. The most prominent name at the period is that of the noblest daughter American Judaism has produced, Rebecca Gratz, who was born in Philadelphia in 1781. Like Rebecca Franks, she too was born to wealth and social position; she too moved in the most exclusive society and possessed like her, beauty, grace and culture. She too might doubtless have made a match as brilliant, as distinguished as her namesake, but unlike her, she was a devout Jewess. Writers have hinted that it was her devotion to her faith that was the sole cause of her remaining unmarried. Her beauty, refinement and wealth of noble qualities, made her beloved by all who knew her, so that we may well look upon her as the ideal American lady and Jewish woman.

Miss Gratz had been the close friend of Matilda Hoffman, Washington Irving's first and only love. Her charm and nobility of character so deeply impressed the great American author, and so enthusiastically did he describe them to his friend, Sir Walter Scott, during his European trip, that the latter is said to have found in her the character he so beautifully depicted as the Rebecca in "Ivanhoe."

Among her intimate friends were some of the leading statesmen and writers, Henry

Clay and Sully the artist, among others. Her career has been appreciatively written again and again, and but a few years ago a sketch of her appeared from the pen of General Grant Wilson.



REBECCA GRATZ

This noble woman from the start took a keen interest in every charitable endeavor. Her name is inseparably associated with every benevolent movement in Philadelphia during the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1819, two Jewish women, Mrs. Aaron Levy and Miss Hannah Levy, happened to witness a case of distress in a Jewish family, and at once resolved to call upon other ladies for aid. Their appeal led to the formation of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia, in which Miss Gratz at once took a leading part. In 1838 she organized the first Hebrew Sunday School in America, and to it devoted her best efforts. She appealed to the ladies of other cities as well, and thus led to the establishment of similar institutions in New York and Charleston.

As early as 1850 Rebecca Gratz advocated a society for taking care of Jewish orphans.

Her appeal was finally answered in the organization of the Jewish Foster Home in 1855. She was also active in the Ladies' Hebrew Sewing Society and the Fuel Society.

Nor were her labors entirely of a sectarian character. As early as 1801 she was secretary of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children, and in 1815 one of the founders of the Philadelphia Orphan Asylum, winning from the Gentile world the highest admiration and sincere regard. Her death occurred in 1869, and her memory well deserves to be kept fresh by the Jewish women of America for all time.

With Rebecca Gratz were associated three other women who deserve to be mentioned. All of them were women of refinement and social standing, thoroughly American by ancestry and intensely devoted to their race and faith. As Leroy-Beaulieu has well put it, it is only those Jews who do stand for their race and faith, who gain the respect and friendship of the Christian world.

The ladies to whom I refer were Mrs. Anna Allen, Miss Louisa B. Hart and Miss Ellen Phillips. They were among the founders of the Hebrew Sunday School and the Jewish Foster Home, and, like Miss Gratz, took a warm interest in all charitable enterprises. Miss Hart was born in 1803 at Easton, Pennsylvania, and to her belongs the credit of founding the Ladies' Hebrew Sewing Society. Miss Phillips was the granddaughter of Jonas Phillips, a Revolutionary soldier, and at her death in 1891 bequeathed over \$100,000 to the charities in which she was interested.

Mention should also be made of Mrs. Matilda Cohen (1820-88), a member of the Woman's Centennial Commission, in 1876, and Mrs. Rebecca C. I. Hart (also of Revolutionary ancestry) who, for thirty years, was president of the Hebrew Benevolent Society.

Did space permit, extended notice should also be given to the names of Mrs. Florence, Miss Pesoa, Mrs. Binswanger of Philadelphia, of the Moises and Miss Lopez of

Charleston, Mrs. Priscilla Joachimsen of New York, the founder of the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society; Mrs. Simon Borg, the late Mrs. Isidor Straus, and many others.

Within the past thirty years, Jewish women have done wonderful work in the various fields of charitable endeavor throughout the Union. The societies organized by them are far too great in number, even to be enumerated within the scope of this paper; much less is it possible to give the names of the noble women who have labored so diligently in behalf of those institutions. Many of them are fortunately still with us, and we hope will continue to labor in their noble work for many years to come.

In law and in medicine, some of the earliest to break down the prejudice against women in the professions, were Jewish women. On the stage, the names of Pearl Eytinge and her sister Rose, who appeared with Booth, must occur to all, and there has been a fair line of Jewish actresses since Miss Solomon appeared in New York over a century ago. In this connection, one need only mention such names as Bertha Kalisch, Clara Lipman, Alla Nazimova and Mary Mannering.

On the operatic stage the names of Rita Fornia, Madame Morena, Madame Donalda, Madame Olitzka, Alda and Alma Gluck are certainly familiar to all. Many names similarly prominent, can be mentioned in connection with the concert stage. In art, we can point to Miss Katherine Cohen, the gifted pupil of St. Gaudens, who exhibited her sculptures at the Paris Salon. In the realm of education some of the best private schools during the first half of the nineteenth century were conducted by Jewish women, like Miss Harby and Miss Moise. Since the establishment of the public school system, hundreds of Jewish women have won the admiration of the communities throughout the country for their work as teachers, while in New York the first female assistant superintendent appointed by the Board of Education was the

late Julia Richman, known not only as an educator, but as a devoted worker in every department for the betterment of the Jewish community.

Several Jewish women today hold professorships in some of our great colleges, even in such important subjects as social economics and philosophy. Quite a number have appeared in the realm of letters. Not to mention contemporaries, we may point to Rebekah Hyneman as a poet of no mean ability, and to Penina Moise, a gifted writer both in prose and verse, the author of "Fancy's Sketch Book," and a contributor to various magazines. Her hymns have for many years been chanted throughout the synagogues of the South. Unfortunately few bright rays came into her life, a life which had much of misery and sorrow, closing with years of total blindness. Miss Charlotte Adams has written an appreciative sketch of her, and I know of no sentiment more pathetic than the last words of Penina Moise. "Lay no flowers on my grave. They are for those who live in the sun, and I have always lived in the shadow."

Numerous women have become well known in literature since the day of Penina Moise, and I am sure that a score of such names must readily occur to all.

Throughout the past century, the cry of distress from our brethren in various parts of the world has come to America again and again, and particularly from the realm of the great White Czar, where pillage and massacre have been hideously rampant in recent years. Some thirty-odd years ago, the first great cry of this character came to us across the Atlantic, when over a hundred thousand of our people were made homeless.

There lived in New York at that time a noble Jewish woman, not of kin to the poor ignorant Russian, but the child of wealth and of culture, a friend of Emerson and of Channing. Up to that time she had devoted her best efforts to her art, the writing of verse; her ideals had been the heroes of

the Greek and the German mythology. But when the cry of her persecuted people came to her, she did not shrink from claiming kinship with them because they were ignorant and ungainly. Without hesitation she wielded her pen in their defense and in defense of Judaism, while her muse, which until then had sung of Admetus and of Tannhäuser, now chanted the lay of the tragedy of her people or the hopeful note in "The Banner of the Jew."

Nor did Emma Lazarus assist by her pen alone. She went herself to meet her persecuted brethren, to give cheer to many a despairing heart. And the great Christian world admired her the more for it. Her career is so familiar, however, that I will refrain from reviewing it.

We today are living in days far more stirring than those of 1880. The whole world is in the throes of a great cataclysm, the martyrdom of our brethren in Russia, in Poland and in the Balkans is no longer numbered by thousands but by hundreds of thousands, and when the great struggle will finally cease, who can tell how many of our unfortunate co-religionists, bereft of kith and kin, will be knocking at our gates. It is for the Jewish women of today to manifest the zeal which animated Emma Lazarus, and it is for them to show that they are worthy successors of the noble women of our faith in the past. But besides all this, they must also show the world that they are worthy daughters of the great Republic, giving of their very best to the cause of our beloved country in these days of trial and tribulation. The story of the Jewish woman in America begins with the gloom and darkness of the Inquisition in Mexico and Peru, but that has long since been dispelled by the glorious principles upon which our institutions are founded. It is now for the Jewish woman of today to make our era resplendent with the charity and self-sacrifice by which she can alleviate the burden of the distressed, not only in our midst but also in lands less fortunate than our own.

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